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SPORTS

An 84th Draft Choice Now No. 1 Success Story

It Was Never Easy, But Cavs` Battle Beat Odds

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RICHFIELD, OHIO — John Battle was 22 years old, and he was scared. He was in his first pro training camp, and he had an aching feeling deep in his gut that it would be his last.

``I`d get calls from him late at night, and he`d say, `Mama, they`re gonna cut me, I just know it,` `` said Marjorie Jackson, Battle`s mother. ``It went on like that night after night. Or else he`d call and not say anything. I`d say, `Are you going to speak or are you just gonna hold the phone?` That child was worrying me to death.``

Battle was the 1985 draft`s 84th pick, by the Atlanta Hawks. He was such an insignificant choice that today the NBA doesn`t bother to draft 84 players- it stops at two rounds and 54 selections.

``John was having a horrible training camp,`` said Bill Needle, who was then Atlanta`s public relations director. ``He was emotionally fragile. We trained in Charleston, S.C., and stayed at the Francis Marion Hotel. He`d sit around the lobby, and I`d see it in his face. He didn`t say a word to anyone. ``Then one day I walked into the lobby and I heard someone playing the piano from the balcony. It was John, and it was beautiful. The thing was that he never took lessons. He taught himself how to play.``

That is the essence of John Battle-he never took lessons; he taught himself.

Now Battle is a success story. Now he is a key substitute with the Cleveland Cavaliers, a 10-point scorer as a shooting guard, a seven-year NBA veteran and one of the team leaders. He can talk of growing up without a father, of the influence of his strong mother, of earning a criminal justice degree in four years. He can feel confident in his career, his life and his future.

Now, it all sounds too good to be true.

Well, it is good. And it is true. But it was never easy.

Battle was reared in Washington, the third youngest of 10 children-seven girls and three boys.

His father was estranged from the family. His mother ``was the backbone, because I had to be.`` Marjorie Jackson cleaned the homes of the rich during the day and government buildings at night.

In her family, two things mattered: working hard and going to church.

``Every Sunday, I took all my children to the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church,`` she said. ``Like all my kids, John went to Sunday School. When he got older, he sang in the choir and was an usher. Even now, when he`s in town, he goes to church with me. I know he goes on his own, too.``

``I got my first job when I was about 12,`` Battle said. ``I`d get up at 4 in the morning and sell newspapers. I wanted to take care of myself, to help my mother put food on the table. Not long after that, I got a job at a grocery store and then working construction. I had jobs all through high school.``

There was time for play-for basketball.

``We have a nice four-bedroom home and a yard out back,`` Jackson said.

``Behind our yard is a park, and when I couldn`t find `Tony` (her nickname for John), he was always there with his basketball. I`d tell him to be home at a certain time, and he`d get so caught up with his playing that he`d be late. ``More than once, I had to whip that boy. But I never had to worry about him getting into any real trouble.``

As Battle said, ``I had good friends, and I had bad ones. I knew the difference, and when things got thick, I`d shake hands with the guys who were the drug dealers and then we`d go our separate ways.``

But there were trouble spots.

By Battle`s junior year at McKinley High, school ended up third on the list-behind his job and basketball. If it weren`t for Lafayette Moseley, Battle might not have graduated from high school.

Moseley is one of the heroes you never hear about. He`s a lifelong high school teacher and coach, a man who knows there is more to life than the gym, a man willing to give of himself and expect nothing in return.

``I said I`d help John with school,`` Moseley said. ``But he`d see me coming in his front door, and he`d head out the back to play ball. His mother didn`t like that one bit, and soon John came around.``

During Battle`s senior year, Moseley became the head coach and his star was a player named Bill Martin, who later would play at Georgetown and with the Indiana Pacers.

``We were scouted heavily because of Martin, but no one was interested in John,`` said Moseley. ``Rutgers came around a lot. I knew their coaches, and I said, `Look, you`re not going to get Martin, but take a chance on John Battle.` I knew they were worried about his grades, but I explained that John had straightened out and he was working hard and getting good grades as a senior.``

``No one from my family had ever gone to college,`` said Battle. ``I only did because of Lafayette Moseley. Rutgers had one scholarship left, and they gave it to me. Rutgers figured I`d just be a guy to practice and maybe help them off the bench.``

In his first two years, that scouting report was correct. Battle played little, but he studied a lot.

``It took a while, but I acquired this thirst for learning,`` he said.

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